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Wilkinson, BurkeSOCY-01.2 The
Ultra Secret(orig under
Winterbotham)

British ear at the German keyhole

The Ultra Secret, by F. W. Winterbotham. New York: Harper & Row. \$8.95.

By Burke Wilkinson

It was originally a commercial German coding device called Enigma. By the time British Intelligence got hold of a model, the Germans had turned it into one of the most foolproof encoding machines ever devised.

It looked like a cross between a huge typewriter and a telephone ex-

BOOK

change panel, with a one-armed bandit on the side to further scramble the messages.

How the British broke the code in the anxious spring of 1940, and so came to know almost every strategic decision and operational order of the German high command is told at last in F. W. Winterbotham's totally absorbing book. In General Alexander's phrase, the project "altered the whole concept of modern warfare."

Some mystery remains about the way the British secured a model of Enigma in the first place. Group Captain Winterbotham, who played a leading part in its actual use, provides a plausible version.

As he tells it, a Polish worker on the Enigma assembly line escaped to France in 1939. Given a workshop in Paris, he was able to reconstruct a double of the machine. From his reconstruction, British "backroom boys" (brilliant mathematicians and linguists in good part) at a place called Bletchley were able to crack the code.

It was then the job of Group Captain Winterbotham and his growing staff to sort out the messages — up to 2,000 a day at times — and see that the vital ones reached the Prime Minister, the Imperial General Staff and the Allied field commanders.

Another version that has recently come out in the British press gives the Poles and the French more credit for the actual code breaking. No matter! The main point is that by April of 1940 the boys at Bletchley were getting a running account of how the German High Command was running the war.

The project was classified Ultra Secret, and dubbed Ultra for short — in the rarefied areas of command where it was known to exist at all.

Ultra's story during the five war-time years that followed is a primer for all future histories of the war. In its terse, condensed style, it is also a précis which all military historians of the

Here are some of the highlights of plans and places that Ultra revealed.

• Hitler's operational orders during the Fall of France which caused Lord Gort to realize that the evacuation at Dunkirk was necessary — and possible.

• The location of Rommel's final lunge against Alamein, pinpointed in time for Montgomery to blunt it before launching his own careful offensive.

• Kesselring's instructions during the Sicilian landings, which made Patton's left hook to Palermo and Messina a bold reality.

• The destination of the Bismarck after she had vanished into thousands of square miles of Atlantic ocean, thus enabling the Royal Navy to close for the kill.

• Hitler's rasping orders to Kluge for the Avranches counterattack that was supposed to drive the Allies back into the sea.

Such are a few of the achievements. Sometimes a lack of radio traffic, or the routine nature of the messages carried, was equally useful and revealing.

For example, the fact that Rundstedt never did issue the order to move the Panzer divisions massed in the Pas de Calais area showed the nervous Allies, in the days leading up to D-Day, that he was convinced that the landings would come there.

Because the Germans gave the Enigma equipment to their allies, the Japanese, there were Pacific tip-offs and warnings as well. Coral Sea and Midway were crucial battles in which Admiral Nimitz profited greatly from advance knowledge of enemy planning.

The crouching machine had its nearly human failures too. Overreliance on its secrets led to the total surprise that the Germans achieved in the Battle of the Bulge. During the build-up for that last-ditch offensive in the Ardennes, the Germans maintained radio silence. There were other warnings, but since the infallible Ultra did not reveal any, the Allies chose to ignore them.

The British did have warning of almost all the Luftwaffe assaults in the Battle of Britain, but the actual targets had code names that were not identifiable. A tragic exception was German plain-language use of "Coventry" in operational orders, before the massive raid there. Churchill himself made the agonizing decision not to evacuate the cathedral city because doing so would tell the enemy that their code had been cracked.

The Ultra story has its heroes, Churchill chief among them, and men with feet of clay as well. According to Winterbotham, who functioned